



MORTON & HELEN SOBELL

After millions of words and \$1,000,000.

HISTORICAL NOTES

Return from Oblivion

On Aug. 18, 1950, a slight, bespectacled electronics engineer who worked on secret U.S. defense contracts was escorted by Mexican policemen across the international bridge at Laredo, Texas. He was immediately arrested by the FBI. Morton Sobell, then 33, had been in Mexico for two months, using a string of aliases. The U.S. Government was later to contend that Sobell had been planning to flee behind the Iron Curtain after six years of spying for the Soviet Union. Sobell vigorously denied the accusation, but his trial for espionage resulted in a 30-year jail sentence. Morton Sobell was soon forgotten by most Americans. Last week, a revenant from oblivion, he stepped off a bus in Manhattan, free on parole after serving 17 years and nine months in federal prisons. He was still proclaiming his innocence.

Thin-faced and balding, Sobell called back other ghosts from the past. In the 1930s, when he was a student at the City College of New York, he lunched from time to time in the cafeteria with Julius Rosenberg, a fellow student. Both belonged to the Young Communist League, and both worked for the U.S. Government as engineers during World War II. Later in New York, they met once again socially.

It was through Rosenberg and his wife Ethel that Sobell got into trouble. The Government later produced evidence that Sobell and the Rosenbergs did far more than pass pleasant evenings together. Sobell, said the Gov-

ernment, gave the Rosenbergs secret information, including details of firing control mechanisms for weapons, and recruited a high school classmate into a spy ring managed by Anatoli Yakovlev, Soviet vice consul in New York. When the Rosenbergs were tried in 1951 on charges of passing U.S. atomic secrets to Russia, Sobell was a codefendant. Found guilty, the Rosenbergs were executed in 1953 after the failure of a worldwide crusade, mostly Communist-inspired, to save them. Sobell was not implicated in atomic thefts but was convicted of conspiring to commit espionage. He would not take the stand to defend himself.

Six Years on the Rock. "Just yesterday, I was No. 31048," Sobell told a TIME reporter in flat, lifeless tones that reflected the shock of freedom. For almost six years, he was immured on Alcatraz, the desolate "Rock" in San Francisco Bay, where the U.S. penned its most dangerous and intractable federal prisoners until it was closed down in 1963. Transferred to Atlanta Penitentiary, Sobell could at least employ his engineering skills, helping to redesign the prison's wiring system. After undergoing abdominal surgery in 1963, he was transferred to prison at Lewisburg, Pa., and allowed to study dental technology. "Prison wasn't really a living death," he says. "It's just another kind of life. All the inmates sit around and write their 2255s [petitions for judicial review of their cases]."

Sobell's wife Helen, who teaches science at a Manhattan school, never ceased to labor for his release. She spoke millions of words at protest meetings and ground out countless appeals for help on an electric typewriter, the one modern appliance in the Sobells' drab Green-

wich Village apartment. With friends who stood behind Sobell throughout his imprisonment, she spent roughly \$1,000,000 on legal maneuvers, including seven fruitless pleas to the U.S. Supreme Court. Money came from those who believed that Sobell had not received a fair trial. Among the doubters were Nobel Prizewinning chemists Harold C. Urey and Linus Pauling, Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Britain's nonagenarian nonbeliever, Bertrand Russell. Sobell, however, betrays scant enthusiasm today for continued legal battling to clear his name. In any case, after the verdict of his 1951 trial and more than a dozen later appeals, it would doubtless prove a fruitless enterprise.